

CENFAD Interview with Nan Enstad
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Conducted by Brandon Kinney



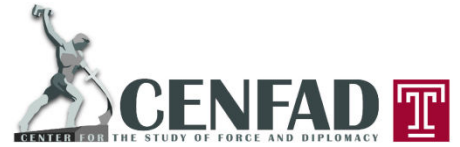
Q: What inspired you to study what you study, whether it is labor and cultural history or transnational history?

A: That was somewhat of an accident. I was interested in cigarettes. My first job was at the University of Carolina in Greensboro, and I was in cigarette country, and I was watching the industry actually crash while I was finishing my first book. And I became interested in cigarettes, they're such an interesting product – consumer product – and there were all these factories around me that were closing. So I started this project as a project that was rather similar to my first book that was about labor and culture, and I started interviewing the cigarette factory workers, but in the course of that I stumbled upon the story that basically drove the book, which was that there were hundreds of white guys from North Carolina and Virginia who went to China to build the cigarette industry there at the same time that basically the same group of people were building the cigarette industry in the United States. And I stumbled on it because I started doing research in Reidsville, North Carolina, very close to where I was living or had been living so I moved, but then I'd stay with friends and then drive up to Reidsville which hasn't had a lot of historians in it, unlike Durham or Winston Salem, and I went to the community college because of the very lovely history archive that's sort of a labor of love of one of the guys there, and he told me about James A. Thomas who was from Reidsville and went on to be the head of British- American Tobacco Company in China, the biggest branch of one of the biggest multinationals – first multinationals - in the world. And I'm in this little southern town, less than 15,000 people, and it was even smaller back then, and I was like “how did this happen?” That this guy from this small town – he wasn't elite, he didn't have an education, he quit school when he was in fifth grade – and I found out that he was the conduit for all of these white

guys to go to China, but why was that the case? Why wouldn't they hire from Harvard and Yale? So then I was just hooked on that project.

Q: What was the most exciting aspect about your research process for Cigarettes Inc.?

A: I think the most exciting thing for me was that it required me to learn Chinese history and go over to China and do research. I didn't really know anything about Chinese history, I was a biology major in college, so I didn't have the kind of broad based – you know, my last Chinese history had been in high school. So I had to start from square one, and I have some friends who are Chinese historians who were very kind to me, but it was fascinating and gave me such a different perspective on US history, to really delve in, and I knew that I needed to know more about Chinese history than just the little story I was following. So over time I just kept reading and reading and reading Chinese history, and then going to China was amazing, and doing research in the archives there was amazing. So that was super exciting, and I think one of the really interesting components of that was that I realized how profoundly differently historians of China or India talk about the idea of modernity as opposed to how US historians tend to still use that word – and transparently. Actually, historians everywhere else in the world interrogate the idea of the modern and modernity, but US historians tend to us it just as a descriptor of time, so that became like “that's very interesting,” when historiographic traditions are using the same words in very different ways.



Q: Can you speak a little about the importance of cross-cultural encounters and the global network of the cigarette industry, such as with regard to managerial or branding techniques?

A: So I think the one key word that I landed on was “simultaneity,” that these systems developed not in some kind of time lag, and I think I’d assumed the U.S. industry developed and then through sort of a commodity chain model, they took that to China, and what I had discovered is that that was not the case, that these systems developed in both places simultaneously with some communication, because the same kind of class of people was traveling back and forth. So I was able to look at for example the emergence of the big cigarette brands, the story I had only know in the United States as the rise of Camel Cigarettes and then Lucky Strike and Chesterfields and Old Golds, that’s the story in the U.S. is that that happens in the 1920s. And what I realized in looking at China and looking at Chinese historians is that Ruby Queen Cigarettes emerged at the same time. So I wanted to know, was that because they took the same kinds of branding techniques from the United States to China, and tried them out there and found that they succeeded. That would have been my expectation given my prior literature. I found that that was absolutely not the case – that the two cigarettes emerged as huge brands in the exact same years through some similar processes but the histories of them developed on the ground, and they were unrelated, and so I was able to track that... What was fascinating to me, was that it happened in both places in the 1920s but it wasn’t a case of “let’s go try these new techniques,” it sort of happened accidentally in both places, and in both places they were surprised about how the one brand captured the market, and so they ran with that... There’s a lot of contingency, and of course, as historians, we love contingency.

Q: A transnational corporation means a transnational labor force. How important is it to include ordinary lives across the globe – such as jazz musicians and sex workers – in a corporate history?

A: Yeah, thanks for that question. So that really was the driving creative force of the book, was to figure out can I write an appropriate history, because I started out – as you mentioned – as a cultural historian, somebody really committed to writing the histories of people previously left out, and I wanted to keep that focus and it was sort of a testing of that process. If we’re looking deeply at these structures, or at these people, how is that related to the structures of a corporation. And what I found is that basically we can see the corporation as a cultural entity at every level, and that creativity, innovation, and power resides at every level of a corporation and that it’s mostly our received idea of what a corporation because of how it’s ensconced in U.S. law that makes us think that “it’s the board of directors, it’s these top executives, managers that are making all the decisions” when you kind of know if you scratch the surface that a big corporation is this vast social entity that’s a mess. Or as I say in the book, things have a way of not staying put, and so there are sites of the corporation actually being made and I think that’s one of the connections to imperialism, right? It’s like a structure that’s imposed in another location but it has to take root with a million different points of contact.

Q: For readers who weren’t here today, what are one or two major points you’d want them to take away from your book and talk?



A: I guess since we're in the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, I guess my one thing would be that I hope that people who are interested in foreign relations would think, read my book, and find in it some inspiration for thinking about how imperialism unfolds on the ground through corporate power. I think there's so much still to be done along those lines, and there's lots of other work coming out on this

topic right now – really thinking about how has not just corporate power in terms of investors and the kind of diplomatic foundation for corporations to be overseas, that I think is one layer that's really interesting, but also how are foreign relations affected by what corporations are doing on the ground.

Q: What comes next for you?

A: Well after Big Tobacco, I scratched my head and was like “what's as interesting and complex as Big Tobacco?” And now I'm moving to Wisconsin, so I'm looking at Big Agriculture and thinking about how especially right now in Wisconsin, we have a lot of big concentrated animal feeding operations coming into the state, and we also have the second big organic economy outside of California, which I didn't really know until quite recently, so there's these two models of agriculture that are claiming the moment and saying “we are the form of agriculture of the future, this is where we're going to feed the world,” but they're pretty incompatible, so I'm interested in how that's playing out at the level of law, on the level of social movements, things like that.